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Twenty-fourth Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) of NEASPEC

12-13 October 2020

Virtual meeting

Review of the NEASPEC Strategic Plan

(Item (6) of the provisional agenda)

Report on the evaluation of the NEASPEC

Note by the Secretariat

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Annex: Evaluation of NEASPEC

I. BACKGROUND

1. The 23rd Senior Officials Meeting (SOM-23) of North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation (NEASPEC) requested the secretariat to commission an independent evaluation to assess NEASPEC's performance and achievements vis-à-vis the current NEASPEC Strategic Plan 2016-2020 and the programme's strengths and challenges with respect to its institutional setup, partnership arrangements, and resource mobilization. In line with that decision, the ESCAP commissioned an independent evaluation of the NEASPEC during April-August 2020.

2. The preliminary outcome of the evaluation was presented to the meeting of NEASPEC national focal points virtually held on 6 August 2020 and to the evaluation reference group of ESCAP virtually convened on 13 August 2020. The recommendations of the evaluation are excerpted from the full report (see annex) and are included in the present document prepared for consideration at the 24th Senior Officials Meeting of NEASPEC (SOM-24).

II. PURPOSE AND METHOD

3. The evaluation aimed to contribute to the deliberations at the SOM-24 to be held on 12-13 October 2020 on the ways to further strengthen the Programme in the context of the subregional priorities of environmental cooperation and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and to provide inputs to the formulation of the NEASPEC Strategic Plan 2021-2025. The evaluation assessed the results achieved against the implementation of the current Strategic Plan 2016-2020 and the institutional setting of NEASPEC.

4. The evaluation was conducted in accordance with the norms, standards and procedures set out in the "ESCAP monitoring and evaluation: policy and guidelines"¹ to ensure the evaluation would be independent, objective, and of high quality. The evaluation was conducted from April to August 2020 by Dr. Joyce Miller, a Swiss-based independent consultant.

5. The independent evaluation involved a comprehensive review of key NEASPEC documents; interviews with 41 national focal points, experts, representatives of partner institutions, and ESCAP senior managers and secretariat staff; a stakeholder survey with 163 respondents; and participation at NEASPEC meetings on nature conservation, air pollution, marine protected areas as well as the meeting of national focal points (NFP).

6. The evaluation assessed NEASPEC's institutional and organizational arrangement and programmatic activities focusing on the period of the current Strategic Plan (2016-2020). The

¹ <https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/ESCAP-Monitoring-and-Evaluation--Policy-and-Guidelines-2017-rev-20180507.pdf>

evaluation focused on the aspects of NEASPEC's relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, and mainstreaming of gender and human rights, and its fundamental strengths and shortfalls. With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and consequent restrictions on international travel, the envisaged field missions were replaced with virtual consultations together with an online survey.

III. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7. The evaluation provided conclusions and recommendations to enhance the performance of the NEASPEC. It found that NEASPEC adds unique value to the six member States, serving as the only comprehensive environmental cooperation mechanism in the subregion and supporting effective cooperation and bringing concerted efforts as crucial contributions towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

8. Based on the findings and conclusions of the evaluation, seven recommendations were proposed for improving the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, and mainstreaming of gender equality and human rights. Key points of the conclusion are as follows.

9. **Relevance:** NEASPEC stands out in the quality of dialogue that it facilitates and its ability to navigate sensitive political territory in its pursuit of environmental diplomacy. NEASPEC's relevance is directly linked to its usefulness to its member States. It is aligned with achieving their obligations related to international treaties and the vision of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. However, NEASPEC's ability to support and accelerate progress towards these commitments has not been fully recognized nor has its potential been purposely leveraged by its member States to this end. This is evidenced by: i) member States' shortfall in staffing its governing body, the SOM, with sufficiently high level decision-makers; ii) frequent changes of the National Focal Points affecting effectiveness and efficiency of the network; iii) slow pace in comprehensively pursuing transboundary challenges; and iv) not ensuring a reliable, independent, adequate funding stream to enable this platform to pursue a higher level of ambition.

10. **Effectiveness:** NEASPEC's effectiveness has been judged as very high based on its capacity to facilitate cooperation amongst six very diverse nations, integrate technical experts' input, respond to requests and proposals from member States and ESCAP, its respect of agreed protocols, and the timely implementation of decisions made through its key governance mechanism, the SOM. In functioning as a comprehensive intergovernmental mechanism, NEASPEC provides a useful infrastructure for multi-state discussion and cooperation on environmental issues. The way in which NEASPEC's thematic agenda has evolved reflects a blend of technical and diplomatic opportunities, which reflect a mix of inputs and direction

channeled from stakeholders (member States and project partners) mediated by the NEASPEC Secretariat. There are opportunities to strengthen the alignment of NEASPEC's programmatic agenda and its implementation with the notions encapsulated in its initial framework, vision statement, and strategic plan, consistent with an 'end game' that deepens within-country and transboundary commitments to environmental cooperation, thereby intentionally accelerating progress towards the 2030 Agenda.

11. **Efficiency:** Using efficiency as a key criterion to assess NEASPEC's relevance and contributions risks distracting attention from focusing on the nature and impact of its contribution. Imposing an efficiency regime onto this mechanism would defeat NEASPEC's purpose and undermine the strength of its political and diplomatic functions. The SOM being negatively affected by the frequency of change of national focal points , loss of institutional memory), which is seen as a major drag on NEASPEC's efficiency, given that its key governing body only meets once year and operates with consensus decision-making. NEASPEC has an opportunity to improve efficiency by enhancing synergies with other regional mechanisms in the region and by welcoming voluntary secondments to more efficiently connect with all member States for regular consultation and solicitation of input/positions.

12. **Sustainability, resource mobilization, partnership arrangements:** As long as NEASPEC reflects the will of the member States, its sustainability is not in question. The intergovernmental cooperation under NEASPEC would be more effectively served through the provision of unearmarked funds and a reliable, forecastable, and adequate flow of resources consistent with its ability to play a more visible, progressive, and impactful role. A more strategic approach to partnership that goes beyond the transactional engagement of national institutes would unleash further financial and in-kind support from project partners. This could also drive catalytic impact, provided that project partners could be linked together in a more formalized way under NEASPEC.

13. **Mainstreaming of gender equality and human rights (GE/HR):** While acknowledging there are differing notions across the member States regarding the pace and way in which to approach GE/HR, by virtue of NEASPEC's association with and resourcing under ESCAP, there is an obligation to address these issues driven from the highest UN level. The recognition that addressing GE/HR is integral to achieving sustainable development provides a way forward. In this light, potentially non-controversial entry points within NEASPEC's work on land degradation, marine protected areas and low carbon cities that have been identified provide a foundation on which to build further.

14. **Strengths and weaknesses of the institutional and organizational set-up:** Mid-level SOM participation, frequent NFP changes, maintaining a voluntary approach, and providing minimal resourcing could be seen as indicators of the political will of member States. This

approach could indeed reflect a deliberate political will to operate in a measured and prudent manner, taking all interests into account, not just the environmental agenda. The profile and impact of NEASPEC's activities related to air pollution clearly demonstrate the catalytic impact of strengthening the 'push-pull' dynamic between NEASPEC and ESCAP. There is a golden opportunity to link NEASPEC's *raison d'être* more strongly to achieving member States' obligations related to international treaties and the 2030 Agenda.

15. The following paragraphs provide an overview of the recommendations excerpted from the evaluation report, and describe the actions taken by the NEASPEC and ESCAP to address the recommendations as well as further actions it may wish to consider in that regard.

<p><i>Recommendation 1: For NEASPEC secretariat and SOM</i></p>	<p><i>Decide whether or not to move forward in operationalizing NEASPEC in a way that would enable the full realization of its founding vision to be a comprehensive environmental cooperation mechanism.</i></p>
<p><i>Recommendation 2: FOR NEASPEC SECRETARIAT and SOM</i></p>	<p><i>Review the 1996 founding framework and update NEASPEC's charter so that it is aligned with the ambition and intention of the involved member States, as informed by the 27 years of cooperation and coordination and in light of the accelerative effect of using a Strategic Plan. As part of this endeavour, it would be pertinent to set a long-term vision, mission, and goals – and make values and principles presently tacit more explicit.</i></p>

16. With regard to recommendations 1 and 2, fulfilling its mandate to serve as the comprehensive intergovernmental cooperation mechanism to address environmental issues in the subregion is further articulated in the new Strategic Plan 2021-2025. The NEASPEC Framework sets the objective to enhance capacities of the member States in environmental management efforts through subregional cooperation and facilitate effective participation of national institutions. The Vision Statement in 2020 recommends to periodically review the environmental conditions and trends as well as the implementation of priority projects with a view to identifying additional priority areas for cooperation; and promote common policy dialogue on approaches and views and coordinated actions on subregional environmental issues. Proposed activities in most programmatic areas of the Strategic Plan 2021-2025 contain the plan for capacity building and technical support through subregional cooperation. The Plan also suggests institutionalizing the cooperation platform in each programmatic area, sharing knowledge and information, enhancing wider participation of stakeholders including national institutions, and linking with regional and global goals. In addition, the Plan provides the opportunity for member States to hold dialogue on new and emerging issues and develop joint actions. Thus, the new Strategic Plan 2021-2025 will guide and provide a roadmap for NEASPEC's future work. The process of the current and new Strategic Plan also reflects the step-by-step and approach envisioned by the Framework.

Meanwhile, the Secretariat encourages member States to revisit the Framework of NEASPEC adopted in 1996 and Vision Statement adopted in 2000 with a view of reflecting the latest development and long-term perspectives of NEASPEC, and thus the SOM-24 to discuss the need and modality of revisiting the Framework.

<i>Recommendation 3: For SOM and NFPs</i>	<i>Honour the notion of high-level participation in SOM, as per the founding vision and provide for significantly more stability of designated NFPs.</i>
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17. With regard to recommendation 3, the Secretariat fully recognizes the need to further improve the effectiveness of the SOM as the governing body of NEASPEC with the proper level of representations from member States. The levels of representations to SOM are different among the member States. However, the comprehensive membership and programmatic areas of NEASPEC place SOM as a major subregional platform that reviews diverse ongoing processes in most priority areas of subregional environmental cooperation. Thus, higher level of representations as well as the inclusion of more stakeholders into the national delegation could further strengthen SOM into a key decision-making body and a main subregional platform for project coordination and management to the Programme.

<i>Recommendation 4: For ESCAP's Executive Secretary and NEASPEC secretariat</i>	<i>Strengthen existing links and identify and broaden new communication and reporting channels between NEASPEC and ESCAP with a view to optimising the synergy of this relationship for mutual gain</i>
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18. With regard to recommendation 4, NEASPEC has initiated concrete steps to enhance its linkages ESCAP's regional programmes as demonstrated through two recent resolutions on air pollution and oceans and new initiatives led by ESCAP divisions on geospatial air pollution information, climate change, and nature-based solutions. These initiatives enable NEASPEC to work closely with ESCAP divisions and align its activities with ESCAP regional programmes. Furthermore, ESCAP management will identify options to increase visibility and linkage between NEASPEC's SOM and ESCAP's main intergovernmental platforms, including Commission and Committee sessions.

<i>Recommendation 5: For NEASPEC secretariat and SOM</i>	<i>Revise the funding modalities to enhance the reliability and level of funding flows, and review options for progressively moving towards more</i>
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	<i>equitable contributions from all member States, with a roadmap towards this achievement.</i>
<i>Recommendation 6: For NEASPEC secretariat, SOM, and ESCAP</i>	<i>Enhance the resourcing of the NEASPEC Secretariat.</i>

19. With regard to recommendations 5 and 6, The issue of funding had been discussed in many occasions in the past SOMs. In particular, SOM-17 in 2012 reviewed a recommendation to move away from the present voluntary contributions to a more stable and regular mechanism. Since then, there has been increasing financial resources, particularly, with project-based funding. However, ESCAP management recognizes that it is the right time for member States to consider institutionalizing the modality of national contributions, for example, through a trust fund agreement, towards more stable and predictable, which could be discussed in connection with the recommendation 1 and 2

20. To strengthen the human and technical capacity of the Secretariat, previous SOMs reviewed the option of having the secondment of national experts to the Secretariat, and enhancing the role of committees, working groups and national institutions in programme development and implementation to supplement the Secretariat’s capacity. The recent development of NEACAP Science and Policy Committee and NEAMPAN Steering Committee, and informal networks of institutions and experts in other programmatic areas have increased the technical capacity of NEASPEC. However, the option of expert secondment could be still useful, which could offer mutual benefits for the Secretariat and member States, and ESCAP will be ready to support such arrangement with member States. Furthermore, the Secretariat will make an internal arrangement for allocating more staff time to enhance the efficiency of work on NEASPEC. In this regard, ESCAP management proposes allocating the Core Fund for co-financing the professional staff dedicated to the NEASPEC operation, as proposed in the programme planning and management: January 2021-December 2025 under the Agenda item 7 (Review and Planning of the Core and Project-based Fund) of SOM-24.

<i>Recommendation 7: For NEASPEC secretariat</i>	<i>Use virtual meetings to enhance the frequency and quality of the intergovernmental connectedness being pursued under NEASPEC.</i>
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21. With regard to recommendation 7, ESCAP management agrees with this recommendation. The new experience in conducting virtual meetings under the COVID-19 pandemic provides new opportunities for both the Secretariat and member governments and

project partners. The NEASPEC Secretariat will utilize virtual meetings even after returning to the normal condition in order to enhance the frequency and quality of the intergovernmental connectedness.

IV. ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

22. The Meeting may wish to invite member States to share views on the recommendations, and secretariat responses, and suggest follow-up actions.

23. The Meeting may wish to decide on holding an ad hoc meeting to develop and agree on a concrete implementation plan for addressing the evaluation recommendations, including follow-up actions with clear responsibilities and timelines.

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